

## Prioritizing Participation: Five Things That Every Teacher Needs To Know To Prepare Recent Immigrant Adolescents for Classroom Participation

By Terri Patchen

Any teacher who has worked in a public high school knows the force oral participation holds in a classroom, for a curriculum, and with the students. Few things can make or break educational access, momentum and opportunity like classroom participation. Present, it creates—communication, collaboration, confrontation, collusion—comprehension (whether of people, perspectives, or positions); absent, instruction flounders (Why won't *someone* say something?), understanding is debilitated, and community is next to impossible to construct.

When oral participation is neither present nor cultivated within a classroom, students and teachers lose opportunities to develop academically, linguistically (Fennema & Peterson, 1985; Swann, 1989), socially, emotionally, and/or psychologically (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Its absence is particularly debilitating for immigrant Latina/o high school students relatively new to the United States, unfamiliar with the language of instruction, and inexperienced in the ways of U.S. schools.

Neglecting the classroom participation of these students is especially disturbing because, from at least Dewey forward, educational theorists have been beckoning practitioners to beef up their initiation, cultivation, and support of classroom participation in order to increase educational opportunity and advancement for all stu-

dents. Classroom participation, while relegated in many classrooms to an abstract number of points (e.g., "ten points for participation." What does *that* mean?), cannot in practice be disputed (and certainly not by those policymakers who flourish in the political arena).

Yet, during the last two decades, most educational debates on adolescent students have ignored the more human (and humane) dimensions of education and have instead focused on issues of accountability and efficiency in schools. Such a focus hasn't helped immigrant students, who are generally referred to in the literature as educationally optimistic (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), but academically behind (de Cos, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 1992; Vernez, Abrahamse & Quigley, 1996).

For immigrant students, school settings in the U.S. represent distinct and often problematic learning contexts. The myth of the American public school as the "great democratic equalizer" has not played out in the education of many adolescent immigrants, and particularly for those from Latin America. In an analysis of "High School and Beyond" data from 1980, Vernez, Abrahamse, and Quigley found that of all immigrant students included in the study, Latina/os were the least likely of any racial/ethnic group to be placed on an academic track, to take three years of English or mathematics, or to take advanced courses of any kind in high school.

Indeed, Latina/o immigrants scored

the lowest of any racial/ethnic group on nearly all indicators for course taking, educational expectations, and college-going (just as their native-born counterparts do). The situation is even worse for those Latina/os who enter the U.S. educational system as adolescents.

"Late entry" Latina/o immigrants, who enter the country after the age of 15 or so, are less likely to enroll in the U.S. school system or stay in school than children who come at an earlier age. Although it remains unclear as to whether these students are dropping out or never "dropping in," there is a great deal of cause for concern; the level of education these students achieve will largely determine the quality of the labor force in the future (1996).

### The Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Classroom Participation

Participation works on a number of levels. First, it immediately and viscerally involves the integration of one's perceptions and practices within the world (be it classroom, household, and/or marketplace). Second, as people participate within larger social structures (institutional or familial), meaning is jointly constructed, interpreted, regulated and legitimated (tacitly or overtly) in activity temporally and spatially "situated" (Eckert, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). And finally, this situatedness (Dewey, 1938/1997; Fuhrer, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991) locates participation within particular moments and settings

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(time and space), and provides it with a semblance of stability and ostensible predictability. As students and teachers then, we shift within, around, towards and against it; what is comfortable and “natural” for some, will be awkward, frightening, and off-limits for others.

Within this meaningful but unpredictable process, classroom participation shapes who and how we are, as well as how we interpret others in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Simultaneously, it creates and builds upon the processes encoded in everyday activities in order to further cultivate linguistic, cognitive, psychological and social domains in practice (Bourdieu, 1977; Cole, 1996; Eckert, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Thus, even as students perpetuate particular participation practices made common across classrooms (e.g., keeping quiet, answering questions when asked, or the rarest still, asking questions<sup>1</sup>), they are simultaneously en-acting and representing their understandings of what is allowed, what is right, and what is safe. The more we consider the realm and reach of participation, the more clear it becomes that successfully integrating recent immigrant adolescent students into the classroom depends upon prompting, cultivating, and supporting their understandings of classroom participation.

### The Political and Pedagogical Dimensions of Classroom Participation

Although classroom participation is one of the principal means by which students express and determine understandings of themselves and others in schools (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Dewey, 1938/1997; Finn & Rock, 1997; Hawkins, 2004; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1973) it remains an amorphous construct, conceptualized and realized in a diversified set of actions, spawned by the dynamic interplay of perceptions and practices.

Moreover, in relation to immigrant adolescents, the way in which participation is conceptualized is not only amorphous, it's unknown. Yes, it's a basic expectation in most classrooms, it's generally included in a list of “musts” when teachers open their classrooms at the start of the school year, and it regularly appears on syllabi, but what does it *mean*? How do students understand it? Consider then, that this very basic of classroom life remains under-articulated and under-de-

fined to the majority of those it purports to work from and for—the students.

It is argued here that the continuing persistence of this ambiguity is prompted, in large part, because student perceptions are virtually absent in examinations of classroom participation. Researchers privilege their own or teacher perspectives of classroom processes, and in the literature, participation is generally viewed as primarily mediated, if not directly controlled, by teachers in non-reciprocal power arrangements (Lakoff, 1990; Swann, 1989).

Undoubtedly, this perspective contributes to the overarching theme made manifest in much of the research on classroom participation: relations between classroom teachers and students are antagonistic. In classroom interaction studies, students are discussed in opposition to teachers (Lakoff, 1990; Mehan, 1998; Swann, 1989), to their peers (Eckert, 2000; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990), and to the system in general (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Mehan, 1998; Philips, 1982; Shultz, Florio, & Erickson, 1982).

Such studies, while generally important to the continuing struggle for educational equity, can however, ultimately work to perpetuate and support divisions within classrooms by constantly pitting teachers and students against one another. Such divisions are further exacerbated by the methodologies regularly used to study participation. In focusing primarily on the perceptions of adults (whether teachers or researchers), researchers neglect the very constituents they claim to be supporting.

### Privileging Student Perspectives on Participation

Although generally neglected in qualitative research (and this is the case for both immigrants *and* high school students), the importance of classroom participation to ethnic minorities<sup>2</sup> has been identified in a few select studies. Of these, most argue that ethnic minority students' classroom participation needs are not being met in our schools (see e.g., the work of Jordan, 1985; Labov, 1972; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; and, Philips, 1972).

One of the most critical, a study on teacher interaction with Mexican American students by the United States Civil Rights Commission (1973) found that, “(i)n view of the central importance of interaction to learning, it is evident that Chicano pupils are not receiving the same quality of education in the classroom as are Anglo pupils” (p. 18; see also, the review of classroom in-

teraction and Mexican Americans, by Losey, 1995). Many of these studies go back a few decades, but their cries for increasing educational equity for ethnic minorities in the classroom remain unheeded (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Finn, 1997; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

To mitigate against the aforementioned gaps in the literature, and to reorient participation research to better respond to and meet the educational needs of immigrant adolescents, researchers and teachers alike must begin recognizing and integrating student perceptions of participation into classroom practices. For many students, the act of participating orally resonates more than the oral statement, question, or response, itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in the participation strategies and understandings of immigrant adolescents.

Utilizing data from an ethnographic study of inner-city, low-income Latina/o adolescents, this researcher found that immigrant students conceptualize participation in ways that differ from the bulk of the literature, and these differences have important ramifications for current teachers and future research (Patchen, in press). According to these students, the mere act of participating in a classroom (e.g., answering questions when asked, offering opinions, presenting group work, or asking questions) has the potential to expand an awareness of self, increase the capacity for tolerating dissent, and broaden the ability to support others while generating a more practical sense of community and safety.

My previous research with Latina/o immigrant students has shown that what this means in practice is not only that students understand participation in a variety of ways, but they differentiate between these ways, recognizing some forms of participation as better and/or more productive than others. Explicitly, students concretely outlined what participation consists of, which strategies work best for which students, who participates, and why and how participation matters. In these overt descriptions of participation strategies, students discussed notions of responsiveness and responsibility, care and connection, and dependence and dependability.

Implicitly, in their discussions of participation, students exposed gaps in the conceptualization and realization of classroom participation, without directly pointing fingers or locating blame. Instead, in talking about how participation works, they simultaneously revealed what isn't working, where there are gaps, and how

things might be better. One recurring variable, however, the importance of relationships—with teachers, peers, and subject matter comprehension—continued to surface in student responses as the determining factor in participation. In order to better understand what we need to do to support immigrant high school students' classroom participation, a brief overview of these findings are provided (for an in-depth and more comprehensive analysis of the findings, please see Patchen, in press), followed by recommendations for teacher practice.

## Knowing What's Expected

Students said teachers mattered in a variety of ways and, while the influence of teachers is generally accepted in the literature, the specific ways immigrant adolescent students said teachers matter haven't been discussed much outside the literature of "care" in education (Noddings, 1984, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). Students said participation increased when teachers did the following: communicated more openly, asked students about themselves and their lives, provided comprehensible input, and didn't embarrass or ignore them, or allow other students to do so.

More important than these particular variables, this research revealed the classroom dynamic as more complicated than previous studies have shown. Articulating an ambivalence about the participation dynamic in classrooms, students revealed a clear attraction to being acknowledged, addressed, and attended to (i.e., being selected to participate), while simultaneously acknowledging the potential such "selection" has to put them at risk.

Indeed, many students identified this polemic of participation—wanting to be "picked" or selected, but not wanting to be "picked on" or hassled by teachers—as a critical dilemma in the everyday construction of participation structures in their classes and in their relationships with their teachers and peers.

## Knowing Who You're Participating With

Students also had ambivalent understandings of the role of their peers in the classroom. There were ways students thought peers could be supportive, but they were just as likely to fear the possibility of negative peer evaluation and subsequent peer humiliation. While authors have argued that peer groups provide social and emotional support, economic resources and

safety (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2000), most of these students tended to view peers as a hindrance to their educational advance, stability, and general sense of comfort within classrooms.

The attribution of some degree of diminished participation to the lack of peer relationships reveals the critical importance of the cultivation of relationships between students (beyond mere relations) to their educational progress. Indeed, "peer fear" worked to inhibit many of these students from even attempting to use the classroom as a dynamic location for learning. Instead, these students understood participation as keeping a low profile, answering questions when asked (if they were certain of their response), and avoiding risk.

## Knowing How To Do It

The final variable identified in this research was the "need to know." Shrinking from actively participating in class, many students described a classroom dynamic predicated upon "knowing," as opposed to learning. Although mentioned frequently by many of the students as an isolated rationale for participating, the "need to know" was also inextricably linked (for most students) to a fear of peer evaluation and subsequent peer or (at times) teacher humiliation if a student didn't know the correct, or expected, response.

This fear was exacerbated for English Language Learners if the response was expected in the target language. For many of these students, "knowing" replaced "learning" as the premise upon which their educational days unfolded.

## Summary of Findings

In the face of insecurity, the threat of peer evaluation, peer humiliation, and, at times, teacher humiliation, immigrant students shrank from the possibility of active oral participation. Absent relationships with their peers and their teachers, students couldn't "know" what to expect, or really, what was expected of them. Always needing to be right, or to "know" the correct answer stifled the potential for critical inquiry and interest, while blunting the development of participatory possibilities beyond, "answering questions when asked." And even that general participation practice was conceptualized in a very specific way.

For many students "answer questions when asked," meant *only* that they would answer questions when asked individually;

they would not volunteer an answer or comment, when a question was asked to the class in general. If teachers called on them specifically, they would feel compelled to respond, otherwise, they remained silent.

## Teacher Strategies: Five Ways To Support Active Participation

Such findings are important to teachers working with immigrant high school students (and in some ways, to all teachers who work with any type of newcomer student, whether it's a student new to the country, the county, or the local school) because they help identify distinct practices that benefit students unfamiliar with new school or classroom practices. When students respond to a prompt, initiate discussion, avoid a gaze that beckons a response, remain quiet, look at another for support, divert attention, or attempt to attract attention, they are simultaneously exercising their understandings of participation possibilities within the classroom and within themselves.

For many students, the very act of oral participation resonates more than the oral statement, question, or response, itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in the participation strategies and understandings of immigrant adolescents. Given the findings listed above, there are many ways in which teachers can work to design and develop classrooms that explicitly support the active participation of all students, and specifically, recent immigrant adolescent students.

## Deepen Personal Understanding of Students' Cultural Background

Teachers need to work on expanding their understandings of the particular cultures of their students. Nowhere is this more difficult than in U.S. high schools, where teachers often have upwards of 250 students in a day. The numbers of students enrolled in typical high schools have only been increasing in the last decade, and such disrespect for teachers and students alike continues unabated to this day.

Yet, deepening our understandings of the distinct cultures our students bring into the classroom will only make our work that much easier. Understanding particulars about the countries our students emigrated from—the conditions of their existence there, the educational practices, and the specifics of cultural practices—will facilitate not only the cultivation of relation-



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ships (which we have seen students predicate academic advance upon), but also the development of educational agendas that incorporate understandings of our students and their needs.

### **Establish Relationships**

Teachers need to establish relationships with their students and to cultivate the time and space for students to develop relationships with one another. The importance of relationships was the one variable that came up explicitly and repeatedly in the study with Latina/o immigrants. They wanted to know who they were dealing with, what (specifically and in detail) was expected of them, and how they were supposed to meet these expectations (again, specifically and in detail).

Classroom instruction can be designed to facilitate the cultivation of relationships through open-ended discussion, organized group work, the structured sharing of knowledges and experiences, and the provision of opportunities for dialoguing with students' family members. Establishing relationships with students and cultivating relationships between students further helps develop their sense of stability and security, two variables critical to the successful acquisition of a second (or more) language, as well as to students' understanding of the particular culture of U.S. high school classrooms.

### **Diversify Participation Structures**

Teachers need to actively and thoughtfully diversify participation structures in the classroom. Although many teachers are increasingly required to follow scripted instructional programs which specify particular forms of classroom organization (and tend to depend upon whole-group instruction), it's important for teachers to continue their struggle to use different modes of delivery whenever possible.

While whole-group instruction is ostensibly the most "efficient" way to get content out to an undifferentiated mass of students, it isn't always the best way to educate all (or even many) students. Instead, teachers should consider establishing a range of participation structures within the classroom that facilitate student participation by providing students with distinct participation modes and responsibilities. Whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one instruction should be "shuffled" within the classroom, so teachers are more likely to meet more students' needs, more often.

For example, teachers can provide stu-

dents with opportunities to think about a question on individual and small group levels. These opportunities establish the space for contemplation and subsequent peer interaction as students share their proposed responses with others. Such sharing provides students with the academic space to check for clarity, correctness, and or better develop or augment their proposed response. It also reorients the focus from the individual (which carries a commensurate sense of "individual" or *sole* responsibility) to the group.

This shuffling of strategies allows students to come up with their own ideas, hear the ideas of others and reflect upon their own understandings in light of what others share.

### **Ask Answerable Questions**

Teachers need to ask questions their students can answer. And no, this doesn't necessarily mean asking questions that are "easy," but it does mean asking questions that are contextually and conceptually relevant to students' lives. For example, teachers can begin by asking new students their *opinions* of classroom discussions, readings, or activities, rather than seeking a specific answer to a question.

Providing students with opportunities to articulate their thoughts without having to worry so much about being right or wrong, will facilitate the participation of more students. This isn't to say that in asking for student opinions, some students won't worry about being "wrong," they will. Instead, teachers should view asking students their opinions on things as a means for generating dialogue within the class, saving perhaps the last 10 minutes of a class for just this type of open-ended interaction and classroom participation.

### **Solicit Student Feedback**

Teachers need to request anonymous feedback about their instructional methods from their students. Although student opinion forms have been abused in many institutions of higher learning (such that many university professors often find their job security held hostage to student evaluations), they can serve to inform instructional practices in ways that better instruction, increase the possibility of content comprehension, and lead to more academic progress.

Initially, evaluations can be distributed early in the quarter or semester to discover how students understand the classroom dynamic (whenever possible,

efforts should be made to ask students about classroom processes in their native language). Then, periodically throughout the course teachers can check in with students about particular activities and/or practices.

Questions that consider both academic and social dimensions of the class should be included in the informal evaluations. For example, teachers can ask students about the ways in which working on a particular assignment "worked" (or didn't), while simultaneously asking about interest in specific content. They can also check in with students to see how they might improve lessons, the use of particular methods, and/or classroom management.

## Conclusions

Teachers need to recognize, as students do, that classrooms are socio-academic spaces, where roles and relationships are formed and perpetuated. Levels and degrees of classroom participation reflect, not only the dimensions of power in the classroom, but an awareness of opportunity and perceived rights, as well. These perceptions shape possibilities for students, and absent explicit instruction on the whys and hows of participation from teachers, many students will flounder.

Thus, research on classroom participation structures and strategies from the perspectives of students is essential to the design, implementation, and maintenance of effective and equitable education programs, and especially so for those students historically marginalized by education processes in the United States. If students' understandings of participation are more explicitly acknowledged, cultivated, and strengthened at the classroom level, then schools can be organized to better support students' needs in schools.

Such a reorientation of our instructional focus will further secure the establishment and development of democratic practice (e.g., voicing one's opinion, asking questions, and engaging in debate) within our classrooms, a process that will only help lay the foundation for increased civic participation post-graduation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an elaborated taxonomy of participation strategies, see Finn, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the studies cited focus on elementary school-aged children.

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